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# Kennedy specials fuel our fascination

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**On the 25th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination, two documentaries focus on his fight for desegregation and on his death.**

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Two years ago, on the 25th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's inauguration, a critic wrote that television had produced enough mini-series and specials cashing in on the Kennedy clan to make a new cable channel possible.

The Kennedy Channel never materialized. But if it ever does, this month alone — in which TV commemorates the 25th anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination with still more specials — will supply enough material to pack its archives to the rafters.

There is a ghoulish subtext to it all. We've just endured an election campaign in which JFK was invoked as a paragon of leadership ("Senator, you are no Jack Kennedy," said Lloyd Bentsen to Dan Quayle, a remark that didn't help him at the polls), and several How-Did-Marilyn-Monroe-Die documentaries that allege Kennedy's rejection of Monroe drove her to suicide.

Camelot indeed. No wonder Americans are cynical about politicians.

Nevertheless, two of this month's most interesting TV programs deal with John F. Kennedy.

The first of these specials airs tonight on the PBS documentary series, *The American Experience* (9 p.m., WXEL-Ch. 42; 10 p.m., WPBT-Ch. 2). *Kennedy v. Wallace: A Crisis Up Close* chronicles, through footage shot 25 years ago by filmmaker Robert Drew, the president's showdown with Alabama Gov. George Wallace over the desegregation of the University of Alabama.

The second special, at 7 p.m. Saturday on cable's Arts & Entertainment channel, is *Reasonable Doubt*, a one-hour documentary about the Warren Commission. This film does such a thorough job of discrediting the commission's report on Kennedy's assassination that one is left wondering how anybody accepted it in the first place.

AP photo

In 1963, Gov. George Wallace tried to block the admission of the University of Alabama's first two black students.

The more interesting special is *Reasonable Doubt*. The filmmakers, Chip and Mike Selby, approach their subject coldly and come up with some devastating information. They matter-of-factly chart the major events of Kennedy's presidency, finally zeroing in on his campaign trip to Texas in November 1963.

Kennedy was in a motorcade, on his way to a luncheon, when he was shot. Texas Gov. John Connally was wounded. The Warren Commission concluded both men were hit by a single bullet, which first struck Kennedy, then passed through Connally, and eventually was found on a stretcher in the hospital where Kennedy was pronounced dead.

The most controversial contention of the commission — which concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone — was this "single-bullet theory."

The purpose of the Warren Commission was to allay Americans' fears that justice was not served in the police investigation of Kennedy's murder. But a poll cited in *Reasonable Doubt* states that few Americans believe the commission's report.

*Reasonable Doubt* charges that the Warren Commission's report is among the most ludicrous documents in American history.

One of the alleged "conspirators" in *Reasonable Doubt*, Deputy Attorney-General Nicholas Katzenbach, is the hero of *Kennedy v. Wallace*. It was Katzenbach who was given the luckless task of confronting Wallace, when the governor vowed to physically block admission of the university's first two black students.

The producer of *Kennedy v. Wallace*, Robert Drew, was granted access to the White House because Kennedy thought a document of his clash with Wallace would serve history. Actually, the film shows us more of Katzenbach and *Robert* Kennedy, the attorney general, who carried out a federal mandate for integration.

Kennedy admirers will find much of Drew's film painful to watch. We don't learn much that we didn't already know about the desegration of the University. And the reflections of Katzenbach and Vivian Malone, one of the students, lend only minimal perspective.

But the footage of the Kennedy brothers at work — their children stampeding through the office — are especially poignant.

Five months later John Kennedy would be assassinated. Five years later, the same fate would befall his brother Robert.

For a multitude of reasons, the Kennedys continue to fascinate us. These two specials reveal some of the reasons why.

i 2